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AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY*

A Review by JOHN T. FREDERICK

A considerable number of people, including some critics, have become aware of the importance of Theodore Dreiser only since the publication of *An American Tragedy*, with its widespread and deserved success. I am not one of this number. Indeed, since I first read *Sister Carrie* some ten years ago I have been a Dreiser enthusiast, and in a modest way a Dreiser advocate. I have assigned him to classes, and prescribed him to friends who were suffering from a surplus of sugar in the literary diet. I have even contested with militant librarians the question of his moral influence. And with a fair degree of thoroughness I have read and studied what he has written. I was prepared, then, to be as enthusiastic as any of those who have praised *An American Tragedy*; and, reading the book after most critics have voiced their more or less qualified approval, I confess at once to a degree of disappointment. I find it the most Dreiserian of Dreiser's novels, but not, for me, the most moving, the best: perhaps this is simply to suggest that I find, after all, the Dreiserian formula not quite the ultimate in novel making.

The most Dreiserian of Dreiser's novels, I say; by that I mean that it is the fullest and ablest illustration of what he manifestly believes a novel should be. In some ways it shows marked improvement over its im-

**An American Tragedy*, by Theodore Dreiser (Boni and Liveright, \$5.00).

mediate predecessors. The lesson of 1915 has been well learned, for one thing: concerned almost exclusively with sex for all of its thousand pages, this book yet contains nothing which could be objected to by a more hypercritical censor than he who caused the suppression of *The Genius*. Packed with detail like *The Financier*, this novel informs the mass with a vitalizing thread of narrative which holds interest where the earlier novel loses it. But more important by far than either of these matters is the fact that in *An American Tragedy* Dreiser achieves a fullness of perspective, a completeness of detachment from his characters, which is greatly to be admired and which contributes enormously to the significance of the book as a work of art. He is by no means the advocate for Clyde Griffiths in any such obvious and weakening way as he is for Eugene Witla in *The Genius*, or for Frank Cowperwood in *The Financier* and *The Titan*. Comprehension that is so full as to be intense he does display, comprehension so full that it includes both sympathy and condemnation: quite the perfect point of view for the thing he is attempting to achieve.

Very largely because of this attainment of an attitude at once wholly intimate and wholly impartial, Dreiser's study of Clyde Griffiths seems to me the most important document of its kind in American literature. No one can read it without enlightenment. One must turn, so far as I know, to the Russians to find its parallels. Among recent American novels the work most comparable is Roger Sergel's *Arlie Gelston*, in which, as in *An American Tragedy*, we have a definitely unheroic figure drawn with surpassing accuracy and insight.

But in spite of the degree of growth which might have been expected in view of the interval since the publication of *The Genius*, there are ways in which *An American Tragedy* shows, rather than improvement, a disappointing retrogression. For example, there is the matter of style. I disagree utterly with those who contend that

in this regard Dreiser shows improvement. On the contrary, I believe that *An American Tragedy* is quite the worst written of his books. I am not thinking of his fairly constant use of the verbless sentence, which at its long and sprawling worst is certainly confusing: he appears to choose this for certain purposes with a fair degree of consistency, and that is his privilege. But I do deplore his frequent lapses of other sorts, grammatical and rhetorical. Perhaps it is merely the professor in me who is irritated by these things; but I confess quite freely that such an expression as "it was hard to think to whom else to apply to" (I, 420) affects me somewhat like a fly in a plate of soup. It is merely the result of carelessness, and may not impair the quality of the medium in which it floats; yet it influences my enjoyment thereof somewhat adversely. After all, there is a right way to do things, and there is a wrong way—not too dogmatically to be defined, perhaps, but at the extremes discoverable, and not without importance.

Almost equally irritating to me is Dreiser's frequent indulgence, in this novel, in a free and sometimes rather pedantic employment of the special vocabularies of modern sciences and pseudo-sciences, as when he tells us in detailed and expository fashion that the prosecuting attorney who secures Clyde's conviction bears "a psychic sex scar."

An American Tragedy makes it clearer than ever before that Dreiser is a novelist of the middle class. His attempts to deal with the surface and substance of polite society are ineffectual here as elsewhere. His Lyncurgus aristocrats are feeble and conventional. Dreiser is always attracted by wealth and luxury, as are his chief characters, and he is forever trying to deal with people who are accustomed to wealth and luxury from their birth; but he is, simply, not to the manor born. More surprising is his lack of success in writing of the proletariat. Here it almost seems that he lacks the interest

rather than the power. Except for the fairly vivid treatment of the foreign girls who work in Clyde's department in the collar factory (and even this is, for Dreiser, hurried) he passes by the whole mass of the factory life of which his central character is a part with only the most superficial and incidental attention. Of the shrinking room, for instance, where Clyde worked, we get only an abstract explanation of the process and of the location of the machines, and the fact that Clyde had to work in his undershirt; almost nothing of the men, the whole tissue of human relationships here. Quite definitely, Dreiser is at once interested and competent only when he is dealing with characters from the middle class: witness Carrie and Hurstwood, Jennie and Old Gerhardt, Clyde and Roberta Alden.

The world which Dreiser creates is a gray or colorless world for the most part; most interesting to note is his relative poverty in vivid details of objective experience. In his description of Big Bittern, the lake at which the drowning of Roberta occurs, he strives quite manifestly for vividness in order to build up the mood he desires; hence we have here a few details of natural description, even the names of a few birds — among them the "wier wier," a species of which my modest ornithological training had left me in ignorance. It is, we are obligingly informed, "one of the solitary waterbirds of this region," and it utters an "ouphe and barghest cry." But for the most part a bird is a bird to Dreiser, and trees are trees. And food is food: Clyde and Roberta consume "lunches"; at the home of Samuel Griffiths the table is "set for six," but there is no hint of what is served — surely a genuine, if minor, shortcoming, since to the sensual mind of Clyde, with its avid curiosity concerning the life of the rich, this food would have been intensely interesting. Altogether, Dreiser's world is one in which observation and appreciation of the objective are, for the most part, dull and vague.

Altogether the story of Clyde Griffiths seems to me not unlike an enormously complete and richly documented case history. I have the feeling constantly that Dreiser worked back from his documents — from a real crime and a real trial, perhaps — rather than forward from an initial conception of character. And so, despite the fact that *An American Tragedy* displays its writer's method at its fullest and most typical, I feel that this book remains for me, in the Dreiser canon, below *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*. Perhaps the confession that I find the story of Jennie vastly more moving than that of Clyde will bring upon me the deserved reminder that I am masculine, and sentimental; but that will hardly be the reason that I hold the story of Hurstwood, in the first book Dreiser wrote, to be the finest achievement of his career.

No, for me *An American Tragedy* is not the great American novel in more than a corporeal sense. I desiderate in that awaited book something of grace, humor, gusto, which Dreiser will forever lack; and grant to his reading of life only its massive veracity, but not completeness, not essential truth.

FOUR POEMS

By HOYT HUDSON

NEW KITTENS

Each with his hard round head
And trembling flanks
I felt and laid back in his bed,
Squeaking his thanks.

The squeaks died out. I heard
The mother singing then.
"Cats will go on," she purred,
"Cats without end. Amen."

LATE MEETING

Not among urns grown old in glamorous lands
Or under amber-dusted skies
I come to you, with tokens in my hands,
And young love in my eyes.

But here, where roaring winds blow leaves like sleet,
Here, in the sudden sunset-glare,
I come to you, dead grass about our feet,
First snow-flakes in our hair.

Time has escaped, has blown past like a leaf,
Life turns to winter: come.
Henceforth let song be low before our grief,
Before our gladness dumb.

BOW-MEN

I hear your bow-string twang,
You catch the song my feathered arrow sang,
And now, between my shots, I hear you call —
Your voice the swiftest arrow of them all.

So we go shooting arrows in the dark,
Guessing their flight to some imagined mark.
Soon may we pause, draw near, and speak of one
Who scorned a nearer target than the sun.

FALLING ASLEEP

Resting at wharf-side now,
One ship among the outward shipping,
Coiled cable on the pile
Loosened and slipping.

The dark sea slopes away.
Quiet sails give themselves to sailing.
One ship has drifted out,
With its cable trailing.

OF MY UNCLE HARRY

By CLARENCE E. CASON

1. *How I liked him at first*

I thought they were nearly perfect then — my family of relatives which I visited in Washington when I was seven years old, — but I can now understand why they got on each other's nerves considerably, and why none of them had much use for my Uncle Harry, who then was going to High School. Indeed, I do believe that their lack of sympathy for him was the most tangible bond that held them together in that dark little flat on Eighteenth Street.

I was visiting in company with my mother. . . . Perhaps it might be just as well to make an unpleasant statement right now, in order to be done with it: I have never cared for my mother particularly. That would be all right, except for the fact that my mother never will recognize the difference between perfunctory love and vital affection. I did not know the difference clearly myself until one summer day. I had been away from home a year. When my mother wrote, "We are so anxious to see you, only eighteen more days now (then fourteen days, then twelve, then nine, then 'just one single week') until you come," I answered dutifully, and I thought truthfully: "Yes, in five days I shall be there at last. I can hardly wait." Finally *the* day actually came. With my forehead specked with perspiration (have you ever been in Alabama in July?), I flung open the door and called, "Well, hello, everybody!" trying to achieve that particular tone of voice known as "just the same as ever." My mother, with too much powder on her face for a hot day: "Henry Webb! Well, well, well, did you really come?" But after I had gone up and washed my face and hands and come down again, we sat in the library room face to face, without having anything

to say to each other. It was very awkward. You see, this was *the* day. Then I knew that perfunctory love must be treated diplomatically, but that it is not a thing to be excited over. My mother did not seem to notice that something was missing. As I said, this is an unpleasant statement to make. It is embarrassing to me. But I had to relate the situation because it has a good deal to do with the way my Uncle Harry has affected me. . . .

Uncle Cornelius was head of the family of six. He had just completed his theological education and was pastor of a brown church on a busy corner in Georgetown, across Rock Creek from Washington proper. I remember there were some moldy leaves in the gutters near the church, and they smelled so rich and sort of like something good when the white-clothed street cleaners scraped them up. Uncle Cornelius had three wonderful atomizers. Once he caught me using one of them, and got quite angry. Uncle Harry laughed. Aunt Julia, who worked in the hospital, said that Uncle Cornelius had taken all the family fortune to put himself through the seminary; but this did not make any difference to me.

I would help Uncle Harry with his high-school lessons. Together we drew beards on George Washington and Julius Caesar. One night he showed me how to watch a thin young man kissing Aunt Della in the sitting room. I laughed too loud, and we got caught. Uncle Cornelius whipped Uncle Harry with a razor strap. I offered to let him whip me too; but Uncle Harry, who was crying a little, said, "No, no!" and I secretly felt very grateful to him. Uncle Edward worked in a grocery store. Sometimes he would bring me apple pies in nice ruffled plates made of paper. One day Uncle Cornelius asked Uncle Edward if he stole the pies for me. After that Uncle Edward looked uncomfortable when I asked him if he had any mince pies; so pretty soon I quit asking him. The other member of the family was the mother of the

aunts and uncles. What a delicious crackly laugh she had! She took me to the Marine Band concert at the Capitol; on the way back we bought fifty pieces of penny candy, nearly every piece different, and the man put them into the biggest yellow sack you ever saw. . . .

It is one-thirty on Friday afternoon. I know it is one-thirty on Friday because I am going to see "The Dark Purple" with Aunt Della at two o'clock on this day. Uncle Cornelius is at home, reading the Bible; Grandmother is mending his socks; Aunt Della is writing a letter on pink paper; my mother is trying to brush the cow-lick from my hair so that I shall appear better at the matinee. In bursts my Uncle Harry, with a shout. I get free from the comb and brush and shout back at him, waving both arms. He holds the end of his book-strap with one hand, sails the books once about his head, and then propels the books at the sofa, which totters from the impact.

"Okra, spinach; sis, boom, bah!

Eastern High School; rah, rah, rah!"

After that Uncle Harry seems quite overcome. He stands in the middle of the floor, with his legs spread out and his hands on his hips. Uncle Cornelius finishes his verse, Grandmother sticks her finger with the needle, and Aunt Della makes a blot. In sheer absence of anything else to do Uncle Harry crouches like a football quarterback, yells, "Forty-nine, sixty-three, nine hundred —" all to my great delight — "forty thousand . . ." and perhaps would have begun on the millions if his voice had not quavered too much.

"What is the matter with you?" asks Uncle Cornelius. "What are you doing home at this time of day?"

We all look expectant. Uncle Harry is no longer the valiant rooter and football player. He is very limp, and his eyes are moist.

"Speak, sir!" commands Uncle Cornelius.

"I got — I got expelled."

I run over to Uncle Harry, and he puts his arm round me.

"*Expelled!*" Uncle Cornelius puts the Bible on the floor beside his chair. "What for?"

"For drawing pictures."

"What kind of pictures?"

"Obscene and ungentlemanly pictures," says Uncle Harry in despair. (I think the word was *obscene*; at any rate, I was aware that neither he nor I knew exactly what it meant.)

We are all greatly agitated. Aunt Della looks humiliated, Grandmother appears hurt, and my mother, being a guest, tries to seem neutral with just a shade bordering upon alarm.

"You come with me immediately, young man," says Uncle Cornelius peremptorily, after a moment's silent suffering.

From the next room come the sounds of a strap swishing and striking, the hard breathing of Uncle Cornelius, and after a while the frank cries of pain from poor Uncle Harry. Aunt Della and I do not go to the matinee. . . .

Late that afternoon Uncle Harry rode me miles and miles along lovely streets on the handle-bars of his bicycle. How merrily the brown and red leaves *snip-snapped* under our flying rubber tires, and how the bright spokes glistened when I dared bend from my perch enough to see them. At that time it was adventurous to eat grapefruit. People had not quite decided whether this strange orange was food or not. Uncle Harry had twenty cents, with which he bought us a grapefruit. In full flight we ate it, I snatching off the thick skin at the ominous risk of losing my balance at every jerk. How we laughed. "Eastern High School; sis, boom, bah!" What fun. My Uncle Harry!

2. *How I didn't know what to think*

I was a sentimental boy, and my parents did not know what to do with me. But, for that matter, what parents ever knew what to do with any child? During the first morning of our trip from Washington to our home in Alabama, my mother felt considerably at a loss because I spent the time weeping into a pillow which the porter brought in an effort to alleviate my distress. Now and then I would answer my mother's questions by blubbering "Uncle Harry" in a muffled sob. My emotion was, as my mother said, altogether unreasonable. But I could not be convinced of that fact for very long at a time during the first morning.

"Harry is a bad boy," my mother would say. "What did you and he talk about?"

"Nothing," I spluttered. "Nothing — we rode on his bicycle, and he bought me a grape —" Here my voice dwindled into sobs, for the memory was too much.

At various times for about a month after our return, my mother or father would find me hidden away in dark corners of the house, weeping. If my father found me, he, being a gentle man, would take me on his knee with a "What's the matter, little David? You mustn't cry like that over nothing. What's the matter with little David?"

(I always for some reason loved to have my father call me *little David*. It made me think of myself as a brave shepherd boy, heaving a mighty stone at a terrible Goliath, who crumpled up and expired in the midst of giving me a very reproachful look. And sometimes my father would sing, "Little David, play on your harp." This quaint old Negro song, to which my father added innumerable stanzas with the skill of a virtuoso, is a link which never fails to bridge the gap over many long years to that time when my father and I together dissolved our sorrows and perplexities in those rude tunes, more lovely to us than any music.)

"You must not cry about Harry," then said my father. "He is not the kind of boy for you to play with."

This threw me into uncertainty. *Why* wasn't he all right? Why wasn't he the kind of boy to play and laugh with me?

Now and then I heard whispers around the house: "Why do you suppose he seems to care so much for Harry?" or "Surely he will forget all about Harry soon." . . .

It is Christmas Eve. Uncle Harry is coming. He has joined the navy. He ran away from home. My mother and father think I am excited over expecting Santa Claus. I am more eagerly expecting Uncle Harry. The doorbell rings, and I rush to answer, knocking chairs aside in my hurry, and sliding rugs out of position with my dashing feet. There he is. "Hello, kid." I do not know just how to take that. "Hello, Uncle Harry." He sits up late with me, telling me about gray ships that skim much faster than bicycles through water deeper than the church steeple is high, while the foam flies and the winds howl over the deck. "What's the deck?" "The floor, kid. . . Let's hit the hammocks." Somewhat in wonder, I allow him to lead me upstairs to bed.

It is Christmas Day. I am surprised to find that Uncle Harry has no present for me, though he looks grand in his blue uniform. We all have presents for him. In the afternoon we take a walk together. Uncle Harry is smoking a cigarette. He gives me a puff, but it makes me feel queer. "How can you stand to live in this town?" he says suddenly. "I don't know, sir — I mean, I don't know, Uncle Harry. I never thought about it." We walk along, and from time to time Uncle Harry grunts as if he were not very well pleased. "Guess that's right," he says in a few minutes. "None of you think about it. You just do the way everybody else does." He threw down his cigarette. "Hell, let's go back home."

. . . .

A few months after that Uncle Harry sent me a picture of his ship, but I did not pay much attention to it.

3. *How he appeared a vagabond*

I shall tell the ages and situations of the people in the story at the time Uncle Harry appeared a vagabond. It was fifteen years after the Christmas visit. Uncle Cornelius was forty-five; he had two children and was minister of a church in Virginia. Aunt Della was thirty-nine, and Aunt Julia forty-one; both married. Uncle Edward was thirty-one; he did not matter a great deal. My mother was forty-three; my father fifty-five; my grandmother sixty-eight; Uncle Harry twenty-nine, and I was twenty-two.

I was a junior in the University and home for the summer holidays. Grandmother had come to live with us. She had a rocking-chair by the library room fireplace and a little room in the back of the house. In the little room she had huge tinted photographs of Uncle Cornelius and Uncle Edward. Uncle Cornelius' visage stuck forth from a wavy blue background; enough to make him seasick, and he did look a bit that way. His eyes were of a startling brown, and savage in their immensity; his lips and cheeks were as red as strawberries. One feather in his hair would have made him a perfect Indian on the warpath. Grandmother made friends of the drugstore keepers, and they gave her all their empty glass chewing-gum jars; these she filled with salted rose petals, which were supposed to be extraordinarily sweet, but they only succeeded in being rather musty and decayed. She subscribed to church publications and took advantage of their offers to send copies of Harold Bell Wright with all subscriptions. We had all of Harold Bell Wright. I read one of them.

My father's business was not going very well. Packs of farmers would now and then burn down one of his cotton gins as a protest against the low prices of cotton.

Everything about my mother seemed to irritate him, the way she sat at the dinner table, the way she wore her hat, the way she held playing cards in her hand. He had begun to keep crude whisky, made by the mountaineers, in green fruit jars at his office, and he drank too much of the vile stuff. One night he was taking a bath during dinner-time. Just as we finished eating he came down in his bathrobe, with his face and hair still moist. "Nothing for me to eat, eh? That's all right." There was an ugly leer on his face. "Open a can of something. It don't make any difference about the old man, eh?" He sat down unsteadily, and was so unbearable in his manner that I rose to go. He became violent, in a half-whimsical and half-mad way, when I refused to obey his command to remain. Suddenly he jumped up and started to dash from the house in his bathrobe. "Do you think I'm going to have my authority broken in my own house?" My mother divined that he was going to the garage for his pistol; so we tussled about with him at the front door, and at last persuaded him to give up his plan, whatever it was. The next day he was more unpleasant than ever to my mother, but he wished to explain to me. We had a talk. "There is something hideous and uncanny about this place," he said. "I don't know what it is. You must never think of living here. When you finish college, go away and strike out for yourself. Never think of taking up with my cotton gins." I agreed with him without question. But, God, how we are prevented from doing what we know to be fitting and reasonable. . . .

It is evening. We are having what is called a family gathering. Uncle Harry has sent us a picture postal of the Chicago stockyards. My mother is reading his message. My father is lying on the couch, with his collar and shoes off, smoking a cheroot. Grandmother has a copy of *The Living Voice* on her lap. On the exposed page is an article deploring the fact that so many minis-

ters have to pay their own house-rent and must pay regular prices for groceries, an article about how prayer stopped a husband from drinking, and an advertisement about how "Fixus" enabled a woman to lose thirty pounds in a month.

"'Dear Folks,' " reads my mother. "What a pity that Harry gave up his education. I have always thought that putting an *s* on *folk* is one of the surest indications of an unlettered mind. And the poor boy is naturally the brightest one in the family."

"Which family?" asks my father.

"*My* family," says my mother with some unction.

My father gives his habitual little sarcastic laugh.

"'I am working here in the stockyards for a spell,' " continues my mother.

"He means for a *smell*," my father puts in.

I do not know whether to be disgusted with him or with Uncle Harry. Grandmother shudders slightly, and tries not to pay close attention; her eyes play upon the periodical in her lap.

"'I stick steers and talk to the men about socialism.' "

Socialism. My economics professor, for whom I have complete respect, has said enough about socialists. The idea of having one in the family!

"He's been acting the fool that way for a long time," my father says. "Probably will end up in jail."

"Poor boy," says Grandmother, with the suggestion of a tear. "Often he hasn't any money. When he hasn't any money he eats at free-lunch counters in saloons, or doesn't eat at all."

"How terrible for his stomach!" declares my mother.

The communication ends with a request for twenty-five dollars. The request is received in appropriate silence. Soon we are talking about other matters. . . .

Two weeks later I took twenty-five dollars from my allowance and sent it to Uncle Harry. Not long afterward my letter came back; it bore a postoffice stamp

which told me that Uncle Harry had left the stockyards. Perhaps I was somewhat glad to have my money again.

4. *How my opinion became different*

I have been away from college five years, working in an architect's office. Now I am at home. The funeral of my father was four days ago. My mother is an acceptable widow, taking the mourning business with considerable seriousness. She does not know whether to have her comparatively new blue silk dress dyed black or not; it is a rather dark shade of blue, and might do well enough. But still one wishes to do the proper thing. It is a problem. My grandmother has several more rose jars. She has begun to put them in the dining-room. *The Living Voice* has begun to offer Gene Stratton Porter with subscriptions. *Freckles* has just come; Grandmother is reading it aloud to us. We discuss it.

I am going to stay at home to take care of the cotton gins which we own. That is the only thing for me to do. My mother takes this as a matter of course; so does Uncle Cornelius. Grandmother has designated three of the best rose jars for my room.

On the table in my room is a postal card from Uncle Harry. It says: "Sorry to hear of your father's death. I am going to join the Merchant Marine. Do come with me, young fellow. We will go to Italy first. I can get you in. I know the captain. Let me know at once." The card has a picture of the Capitol in Washington.

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He sits up late with me, telling me about gray ships that skim much faster than bicycles through water deeper than the church steeple is high, while the foam flies and the winds howl over the deck. "What's the deck?" "The floor, kid. . . . Let's hit the hammocks." . . .

My Uncle Harry!

BRIEF REVIEWS

Our Times: The United States 1900-1925. I. The Turn of the Century. By MARK SULLIVAN. (Scribners, \$5.) This is surely one of the most fascinating books of the year, and one of the pleasantest things about it is that it is to have a sequel to the extent of three volumes more in which Mr. Sullivan's survey of his period, here so happily begun, will be completed. In this volume eighteen chapters are devoted to considerations more or less general in their application to the late 'nineties and the first few years of the twentieth century, and the remaining chapters take up the years 1900-1903 separately. The second volume will, I understand, be devoted to "the Rooseveltian era."

Mr. Sullivan has a remarkable grasp of details, and a journalistic facility in managing them. He knows how to play up the striking and picturesque. His mind is ever active, with an interest in details which is contagious. He is not, however, subtle; nor is he often really profound. The fact is that he is not critical enough. Take, for example, the definition of Americanism in the third section of the second chapter. Is there really a taboo against aristocracy in this country? Is there "a freedom from stratification into castes, social or industrial"? Is "responsiveness to idealism" a "national trait, greater than was common among older nations"? I think Mr. Sullivan does not really mean "idealism" so much as a kind of generosity. And he omits to name what his book nevertheless impresses upon one — a faith in bigness for its own sake, and an unusual interest in material things — as characteristic American qualities. The section on theories of historical writing shows a similar lack of careful distinction. But I think we must take Mr. Sullivan as he is, and be thankful for his wide interests, his never-failing curiosity, and his talent (which is almost genius) for ordering his materials. He is the best type of American journalist.

It has been a great quarter-century. The development of the automobile, the telephone, the linotype, the airship, the radio; the careers of Bryan, Roosevelt, Wilson; the Great War — these have been stirring times. Mr. Sullivan is interested in prominent personalities, but he is even more interested in the average man; and the development of fashions, sports, fads, currents of thought and taste, enthusiasms, plays a large part in his story.

Most novels are not so interesting as this history.

F. L. M.

Wild Plum. By ORRICK JOHNS. (Macmillan, \$1.25.) The seventy pages of this neat little book hold a number of beautiful poems. Here and there, however, I feel that force is lost by the very effort to gain it. Orrick Johns is hardly a master of the increasingly popular modern device of using unpoetical words in unexpected and startling ways: he should leave it to its more dexterous exponents, Richard Kirk of the ironic verses for gravestones, and Virginia Moore of *Not Poppy*. While neither of these two, I believe, has the poetic insight of Johns, yet neither of them would have been likely to ruin the otherwise touching little "Requiem" with its present last verse:

Lost in song,
Loving wrong —
Long, long
Sweet, now rot;
God wot
Death the strong
Stilled your song.

It would not be fair, however, to neglect mentioning the beautiful and well-known title-poem, "Wild Plum," and the equally-quoted lines:

"But a light tan cow in a pale green mead,
That is very beautiful — beautiful indeed,"

from "Little Things," also in the volume. Many of the other pieces are written in the same rhythm as this last, often with delicate and beautiful effect; the climax of them all, to me, being "The Door":

"Love is a proud and gentle thing, a better thing to own
Than all of the wide impossible stars over the heavens blown,
And the little gifts her hand gives are careless given or taken,
And though the whole great world break, the heart of her is
not shaken. . .
Love is a viol in the wind, a viol never stilled,
And mine of all is the surest that ever time has willed.
I shall speak to her though she goes before me into the grave,
And though I drown in the sea, herself shall laugh upon a
wave;
And the things that love gives after shall be as they were
before,
For life is only a small house . . . and love is an open
door."

C. B. N.

Glimpses of America, by SUDHINDRA BOSE. (M. C. Sarkar & Sons, Calcutta, 3 Rs.) There have been too many bad little books about America by fly-by-night visitors; but here are some observations and opinions by a trained and scholarly gentleman who has had long opportunity to make sure of his facts and who has yet retained a foreign point of view. This should be a stimulating volume for the Indian audience for which it was written: it is stimulating also for American readers. If there is that in the book wherewith an American may feed his pride of country, there is also no small cause for shame in many of these chapters of exposition and interpretation. F. L. M.

Edgar Allan Poe, by JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH. (Knopf, \$3.) This is not a biography of Poe, but a study of his life and work from the point of view of the Freud-Jung theory of the subconscious. Mr. Krutch accepts this theory wholly, and a criticism of his study must begin by pointing out that the Freudian hypothesis is not only no more than a hypothesis, but one which has as yet a very tentative acceptance among scientific men. It may well be that in another decade or two Freudianism may take its place with exploded pseudo-sciences like phrenology (which was once quite as widely accepted as the fantastic theories of Sigmund Freud now are). But Mr. Krutch swallows the whole thing without a grimace, and proceeds to "psych" Poe according to the new principles. He finds that Poe's sex life governed all his actions and dictated all his works. An extraordinary sex-repression, he would have us believe, was responsible for the qualities to be found in Poe's stories and poems. From the argumentative point of view, Mr. Krutch's book is interesting and remarkable; and certainly all Poe students will wish to read it.

From the point of view of the encouragement of literature, it is one of the best arguments for sex repression imaginable.

F. L. M.

The Happy Islands, by MARLOW A. SHAW. (McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, \$2.) So richly does this book combine qualities which I most admire and enjoy that, even did I not have the privilege of the writer's friendship, I should be made very happy by its appearance. Love of place, the attentive and profound appreciation of the beauty of some portion of the earth, means as much to me, I believe, as anything in literature; and love of place is the very core and substance of this volume of "stories and sketches of the Georgian Bay." Vividly and delicately,

with utmost fidelity of detail and sincerity of emotion, the region is set before us. It is a region highly individual in forms and colors and in its whole emotional connotation. And because this individuality is rendered so well, *The Happy Islands* will constitute for most readers a real and precious extension of experience. To the effect of the book in this connection, the simple and decorative drawings of Thoreau Macdonald add something, though not much.

Love of people is strong in the book, as well: a sometimes whimsical and always gentle comprehension of motive and action in which the writer does not fail to include his own less admirable moments. Such characters as Jake, and Jones, the Cleveland lawyer who collects driftwood, are brought very close to the reader and are well worth knowing.

I like this prose. I can read "At Moose Deer Point" over and over aloud for the sheer joy of the fine flow and fall of the sharply accurate words, the secure and supple rhythm of sentence and clause.

Altogether, *The Happy Islands* is a sound and worthy book, a fine and genuine expression of rich experience. J. T. F.

O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories of 1925. (Doubleday, Page, \$2.00). Undoubtedly this year's *Prize Stories* are better than usual. Perhaps the new method of choosing them has something to do with the improvement. There is still too much attention given to form, however, and too little to basic significance. The prize-winning story, Mr. Julian Street's "Mr. Bisbee's Princess," is, as I said in reviewing his volume of that name some time ago, not very important. It is beautifully done, as Mr. Street's stories always are. It deals with babbity, but without any earnestness or any feeling except a detached amusement. Mr. Steele's "The Man Who Saw Through Heaven," which tied with "Mr. Bisbee," might have been a great story if the author had not lost sight of his big idea in his anxiety to build a big story. This is Mr. Steele's evil genius — this unwillingness to let the story write itself honestly and greatly. Wythe Williams' "Splendid with Swords" is almost a *ne plus ultra* of technic: it is about as moving as an artificial and thoroughly romantic story can be. But to my mind the best story in the book is Mrs. Eliot's "Maternal" from the *Forum*. I think it is one of the two or three best stories of last year and very definitely the best story in this volume.

F. L. M.

Listen, Moon! by LEONARD CLINE. (Viking Press, \$2.) In most ways *Listen, Moon!* is very different from Leonard Cline's book of a year ago, *God Head*. In fact, perhaps the most important reflection aroused by a reading of the new book is the realization that the author has a range not easily paralleled in contemporary literature. But I believe equally interesting is the fact that Mr. Cline is doing quite successfully something very rarely attempted in America: he is writing romance which is largely satire, and satire which is partly burlesque; and he is having a tremendously good time doing it. Exuberance, spontaneity, overflow in this book. It is very remarkable in style, not infrequently highly beautiful. There are passages of the sheerest poetry, for Leonard Cline is poet first of all. The reader is recurringly delighted by the perfect phrase: a "vexed and ominous rattle of kitchenware," a chin "magnificent with acne." Zest for life, eager and appreciative exploration of the entire range of experience—these inform the whole texture of *Listen, Moon!* It is significant that Leonard Cline has seen "a cluster of dogbane with its delicate little pink and white bells in the sun quite drowsing—how they must tinkle by moonlight!" And it is significant that he has tasted "chicken a la Maryland, succulent and never before so tender; cucumbers fried in crisp sweet slices and salsify in cream and mashed potatoes sensuously smooth and rich." Undoubtedly this is a pagan book; undoubtedly, too, it is a joyous book; and for its joyous paganism I am grateful.

What else can Leonard Cline do? To what perfection can he unite the sometimes almost evangelistic seriousness of *God Head* with the rich playfulness of this later book? His work, if not massive, is arresting and intensely fascinating. No reader of the present novel will fail to await his next with eager interest.

J.T.F.

Nigger Heaven. By CARL VAN VECHTEN. (Knopf, \$2.50.) I sometimes think (in more pessimistic moods perhaps) that our contemporary literature is a series of raree-shows—an arcade of peep-cabinets, where one can go to get a glimpse, if possible, of something novel. The latest sensation of all is the "New Negro." Whether this will be more than a raree-show remains to be seen; the handicap which is at once the despair and the delight of contemporary criticism is that one can never be quite sure whether one of the movements of the day will turn out to be contemptible or cataclysmic. Certainly the negro is making himself felt in the arts these days, and in Europe as well as in

America. "On devient fou; on devient nègre," wrote an unsympathetic critic of the Parisian stage the other day. About the same time a very prominent American novelist remarked, "I'm crazy about the niggers!" What will come of it? Well, it is worth while if only for certain of the lyrics of Langston Hughes.

Nigger Heaven is an interesting by-product of this movement. I have not quite enough faith in Mr. Van Vechten's sincerity to accept without questioning all his tuition upon the situation of the negro in Harlem; but in the main it is convincing. Our author appears to be more in earnest than usual, and the first half of *Nigger Heaven*, though it contains little story, succeeds in sketching a vivid and fascinating picture of Harlem life. The second part is rather too heavily weighted with that propagandum which is almost unavoidable in negro novels; as for the story, although the Van Vechtenish vamp episode is unintentionally but none the less uproariously funny, the melodramatic denouement is strongly handled.

Nigger Heaven is filled and permeated with the strangely fascinating materials of Harlem life. Of the two main characters, the man is so weak that we have contempt for him and no sympathy, while the girl's earlier phase is better handled than the latter. And why is Mr. Van Vechten so often guilty of banality and artificiality in his dialogue? F. L. M.

Color, by COUNTEE CULLEN. (Harper). *The Weary Blues*, by LANGSTON HUGHES. (Alfred A. Knopf, \$2.00). The work of these two young negro poets, while betraying in a few places youthful imperfections of technique and a hasty disregard for the finesse of composition, has nevertheless much strength and beauty and vision.

In *Color*, lyric color indeed plays red and golden. In these verses of Cullen there flares the sweet passion of youth, and young pride in the beauty of flesh and the lust of living. Particularly noticeable is the juxtaposition of that frequent ironic sophistication of the younger verse writer, and the inevitable love of the negro for biblical subject and theme, — however unconventionally they be treated, — such as we find in "Black Magdalen," "Simon the Cyrenian," and "Sacrament." Poems that take for theme the eternal conflict of races strike a dominant note in the volume; and there are a number of brief, epigrammatic, "epitaph" pieces. The title poem of the book, "*The Shroud of Color*," which received considerable comment at the time of its publication, seems to me but a weaker

imitation of Millay's "*Renascence*." But in less pretentious poems, such as "*Heritage*," "*Judas Iscariot*," and "*To John Keats*," young Cullen displays an individual pictorial and dramatic imagination.

For a young person, Langston Hughes has an exceedingly adventuresome background of color and romance. It is not surprising, therefore, to find a great diversity of subject and mood in this first book of poems. He follows the moan of a jazz band in a Harlem night club, sings to the little brown harlots in the cabarets, indulges in dreams under the eternal moons of youth, slips into strange seaports, and voices the tragedy at the heart of his race. He traverses with illusive grace the scale from lyric joy to lyric melancholy. While he might write more intensely, introspectively, and maturely than he does,—there is really no need for his doing so. And while some of these brief lyrics may live,—there is really no need for that either. Even the art of the moment may fulfil its function of beauty.

These two young poets, who have so ably spoken for their race, are not the only ones among the negro people who are finding modes of artistic expression. And the word for the future is voiced by Langston Hughes:

"We have tomorrow
Bright before us
Like a flame.

"Yesterday, a night-gone thing,
A sun-down name.

"And dawn today
Broad arch above the road we came,—
We march."

R. L.

BIOGRAPHICAL

CLARENCE E. CASON was born in Alabama thirty years ago. After attending college at the Universities of Alabama and Wisconsin, he spent several years in journalism in New York, Washington, and Louisville. The last four years he spent in teaching at the University of Wisconsin; he is now a member of the faculty of the University of Minnesota.

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